



For most teachers entering the profession, the early years are marked by a steep learning curve with energies directed toward mastering the curriculum, learning to pace instruction, discovering how best to manage students, fitting into the culture of the school, and establishing positive relationships with students and colleagues. So, naturally, for these beginning professionals, their sole focus is learning the fundamentals of teaching (Greenlee and deDeugd 2002).

As teachers begin to master the art and skill of teaching, develop effective personalized teaching styles, and feel confident, they begin to shift their thinking from basic survival to their personal career development, sometimes wondering whether a teaching career, with a focus at the classroom level, is their ultimate niche or whether they should consider another career path. For a significant number of people, teaching is their passion. They could

not imagine being anywhere but the classroom. The joys as well as the challenges they experience every day only reinforce their need to focus their careers exclusively on teaching.

What typically distinguishes these faculty members from those who may look beyond the classroom is the tremendous sense of daily self-fulfillment they experience helping children succeed. Not surprisingly, what often drives their career development is a desire to be master teachers. These individuals, who are the heart and soul of the best in education, look to relate career development with teaching success (Bell and Gilbert 1996; Levin 2003; Conner 2004).

While the majority of teachers choose to remain classroom focused, others may experience a desire to step outside the classroom and seek out other career options within the field of education. When these feelings begin to emerge, teachers often start to ask themselves what other opportunities are available.

Development: Have You Considered School Administration?

by Thomas A. Kersten and Jeffrey R. Kersten

As you look to the future,
assess your fit, marketability,
and outlook for school
administration.

Career Development Options

Those aspiring to develop their careers beyond classroom teaching will discover that their choices are somewhat limited. Aside from pursuing teaching options at different levels of education, serving as private consultants, or working in the private or for-profit school sectors, career advancement opportunities can be found primarily in school administration.

Positions available generally include administrative support roles such as deans, coordinators, and program directors, or direct line positions such as department chairs, assistant principals, and principals. Because most career advancement opportunities for teachers are in administration, an important question is: What is the employment outlook for a career in school administration?

School Administration Job Outlook

Though the types of positions may be somewhat limited, the good news is that the current market for school administrators is one of

the most promising in the past 30 years and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The Bureau of Labor Statistics ([BLS] 2005) projected that job openings in educational administration will be more numerous compared to all other jobs through 2014. Contributing to this growth, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), is a projected 5 percent increase in elementary student enrollment by 2014. In addition to enrollment increases, an expected spike in administrative retirements will contribute to a positive employment outlook in school administration.

In Illinois, for example, the State Board of Education (Ruiz and Dunn 2005) reported that public school districts will employ approximately 2,700 new administrators through 2008. The report also ranked the need for junior high school and high school principals and assistant principals in the top five of noninstructional public school shortages through 2007 (Ruiz and Dunn 2005). A similar study found that more than one-third of Illinois middle school principals indicated that they will retire by 2009 and that many key educational stakeholders—including superintendents, policy makers, higher education personnel, and state legislators—believe that finding an adequate number of highly qualified candidates to fill anticipated vacancies will remain a problem through this same period (Mulhall, Flowers, and Mertens 2004; Ringel et al. 2004).

Ironically, further enhancing employment prospects has been the sharp increase in administrative job responsibilities coupled with the highly visible accountability pressures related to No Child Left Behind. Without the substantial increase in compensation needed to entice some teachers into careers as school administrators, the candidate pool has decreased (BLS 2005). For aspiring school administrators, these factors have opened opportunities in this career field, making administration a real and viable option.

Assessing Your Fit for Administration

If you are considering a career in school administration, you will want to weigh several factors to determine whether school-wide leadership responsibilities and administrative job demands are a good fit for you.

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Career Satisfaction

Start your personal assessment by determining what you find most rewarding about education. Do you experience a great deal of satisfaction working directly with children and thrive in an environment where you direct your own classroom? Or, are you intrigued by the possibility of leading a school and managing others, even though this may mean assuming responsibility for a much wider range of issues?

You must recognize that administration is more adult-centered than classroom teaching, with less day-to-day contact with children. If you truly love the classroom, you need to weigh the sense of fulfillment you experience teaching against the potential satisfaction an administrative career may offer.

Responsibility

One of the genuine appeals for many career teaching professionals is the flexibility they enjoy in delivering instruction. Classroom teachers know that their success is, to a great extent, directly linked to their personal performance, and that they are the primary classroom decision makers. Building-level administrators, in contrast, assume a broad level of responsibility for the overall success of the school, with somewhat less decision-making autonomy.

As part of their role, administrators supervise faculty and staff members and respond to the demands associated with management. At times, these demands can place building administrators in reactive situations where, from moment to moment, they have to deal with unexpected issues or problems (Rosborg, McGee, and Burgett 2003). Before you choose administration, you must ask yourself whether you would relish the varied, and sometimes hectic, daily lifestyle and increased responsibilities that characterize building-level school administration.

Management

How good are you at juggling? One of the realities of administration is the need to manage multiple priorities and react to unpredictable events within the ebb and flow of the daily school culture. Successful administrators often are motivated by an environment characterized by ambiguity, competing stakeholder demands, and political pressures from both within and outside the organization (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005).

If you are stimulated by the thought of a work environment that, at times, can pose challenging decisions, if you have the fortitude and patience to deal with multiple and sometimes competing priorities, and if you are comfortable handling politically motivated issues, you may find school administrative leadership exciting and rewarding.

Time Demands

Beginning administrators discover that one of the most noticeable changes from teaching is the expanded work hours. In addition to having a longer work year than classroom teachers, administrators have daily schedules that are quite similar to middle managers in the business world, who typically are expected to get the job done even if it means working evenings or periodically on weekends.

Not surprisingly, practicing administrators often report a lack of adequate time to accomplish all that needs to be done (Kersten and Israel 2005). However, these same administrators are motivated by the variability and challenges inherent in school leadership and accept the time demands and potential stresses that typify an administrator's workday. As you consider an administrative career, you must ponder these factors and their potential impact on both your personal and professional lifestyle.

Tolerance

If you aspire to administration, you must be prepared to deal with problems as well as criticisms. The nature of school administration is that principals and assistant principals typically become the focal point for school decision making and problem solving. When something does not go well or an unpopular decision is made, others tend to direct their concerns or frustrations at the administration. At times, these can take on a personal tone and create anxiety.

Successful administrators learn to depersonalize these events and, in essence, become desensitized to criticism (Rosberg et al. 2003). They also typically experience a sense of personal satisfaction in knowing that they made the right decision even if a more politically expedient one may have been more popular. As you consider your career options, you must assess your tolerance for the problems and criticisms that are inherent in school leadership.

Pursuing a Career in Administration

If you have assessed your fit for school administration and are excited about pursuing this career advancement option, your next step is to consider what opportunities you have now that could enhance your chances of landing an administrative position in the future. To identify career-preparation strategies, the authors surveyed a random sample of 300 Illinois superintendents and asked what advice they would offer aspiring school administrators. Surveys were completed by 42.7 percent of those sampled, representing 128 suburban, rural, and urban superintendents from small, medium, and large school districts throughout the state. Though the data are Illinois specific, the information likely would be applicable in other states.

Seeking Leadership and Administrative Experiences

The career-preparation strategy cited most frequently by those interviewed was that perspective administrators should gain as much leadership experience as possible while they are still in the classroom. Suggestions offered by superintendents in the study included:

- **Meet with your building principal to share your career ambitions.** Ask your principal to facilitate administrative leadership opportunities in your school or even district-wide. Express how passionate you are about an administrative career.
- **Volunteer for as many committees, special program projects, and supervisory activities as you can.** By seeking out these types of experiences, you will show your initiative and begin to build the personal qualifications you will need as a potential administrator.
- **Test your leadership skills as a summer school principal or an instructional team leader.** These quasi-administrative experiences will help separate you from less prepared candidates for administrative roles. These experiences also provide opportunities for you to test your leadership and decision-making skills in a somewhat controlled environment.
- **Complete an administrative internship either while you are teaching or as a full-time student.** Some school districts and most university administrative certification programs offer internship options that can be included as administrative experience on your résumé.

Building Your Professional Knowledge Base

The days of a career track from coach to assistant principal or principal are long past. Today, rising to an administrative-level career requires much more than simple succession. Educational stakeholders expect their building-level administrators to be knowledgeable and up-to-date on the latest issues, trends, and best practices in the field. In addition, administrators must have concrete suggestions for improving schools, increasing student achievement, generating public support, and improving everything from student behavior to parent communication.

To build your knowledge base, superintendents in the study recommended the following strategies:

- **Attend numerous staff development programs, workshops, and conferences.** These meetings help keep you well-informed and well-positioned to provide the type of positive, pragmatic leadership everyone from teachers to parents to boards of education seeks.
- **Begin a graduate program.** Continuing your formal studies shows your commitment to professional growth and expands your professional background.
- **Take an active leadership role in professional**

organizations at the local and state levels.

Leadership roles build your administrative repertoire.

- **Test what you are learning in your own classroom.** Applying what you are learning through your professional development will help you better understand the relationship between theory and practice.

Growing an Extensive Professional Network

Aspiring administrators should create a professional network of teachers, administrators, and other colleagues. Not only will networks provide you with opportunities for professional conversations, but they also will create valuable connections that may ultimately lead to interviews.

Superintendents in the study suggested that networking should begin in your own school district, especially with your building and district administrators. You will discover that administrators are asked regularly by their colleagues to recommend candidates for specific positions. They also receive both formal and informal calls for references and, therefore, can be the keys to a successful job search. Superintendents interviewed noted that aspiring administrators can enhance their candidacies significantly by being active and highly visible within their school districts, contributing positively to school improvement efforts, establishing reputations for solid interpersonal skills, and going above and beyond the norm in their school activities.

Closing Thoughts

As you consider your future options in education, you have two distinct career routes available to you. You have to ask yourself whether your long-range interest is in the classroom—with its focus on curriculum, instruction, and personalized student contact—or at a broader-based, school-wide level, primarily with adult interactions. Either way, you can take great satisfaction in knowing that you are truly making a difference for children. ■

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